Nature's Bounty

American Floral Painting, 1835–1935

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K. M.

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NATURE'S BOUNTY

American Floral Painting, 1835–1935

Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion

April 23–June 30, 1993

Severin Roesen

Flower Piece, 1862

A Universal Garden

Georgia O'Keeffe once wrote: "When you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower and I don't."

O'Keeffe poses us a hard task: to forgo our associations. For the manifold associations of flowers extend from symbolism to sentiment, from science to poetry, from religion to medicine. Great names and events crowd in: Linnaeus working out his taxonomic system, Goethe searching for the *Urpflanze*, Darwin writing about the fertilization of orchids, Thoreau using his hat as a botany box, Emerson wandering around the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, Asa Gray arguing with Louis Agassiz about species.

Can we imagine a universal garden, spread across acres of time and tended by gardeners of different beliefs—Oriental and Christian, classical and Near Eastern, Renaissance and Victorian, medieval and Rococo? Flowers, both exotic and commonplace, are transfused by meanings which often mutate in an image of species: the rose, attribute of Venus, goddess of love, becomes for Christian symbolism the sign of pure love and sacrifice; the grapevine, the vine of the true Christ; the classical laurel, dedicated to Apollo, the symbol of success; the jack-in-the-pulpit, painted in series by O'Keeffe, reads in the floral dictionary as ardor and zeal.

Meaning and syntax alter by culture and period, shifting with the ebb and swell of civilizations that have themselves been held to subscribe to organic principles of bud, bloom, and decay. Life, death, resurrection, mortality, immortality, growth—all are implied by the flower, whose constant presence on a planet filled with living things has invited culture after culture to deposit this rich palimpsest of references.

One is tempted to resort to the flowery language of the Victorians: the flower is life incarnate. Tough stuff, this, for an artist to deal with. Yet the strength of the American flower-painting tradition lies precisely in its ability to interfuse spirit and floral shell in an image of Emerson's fact as the "end or last issue of spirit."

We are not really surprised that the seventeenth-century Dutch, with their appetite for the particular, should have produced one of the world's great traditions of flower painting; nor that Oriental cultures (especially the Sung painters) should have done so as well. But it may come as a surprise that the humble tradition of flower painting in America rivals these in quality and endurance.

The reasons are rooted in the American cultural landscape: a unique protectiveness toward God's earthly furniture, and a respect for the integral wholeness of object identity within the work of art. There is an urge to reconstruct that identity—its weight in space, its surface skin and texture—and then to float to that surface the "spirit" residing in the Emersonian fact. This delicate enterprise was encouraged by the strong transcendental strain that permeated American art and literature in the nineteenth century and that continues to resonate in the twentieth.

There was, then, a fervent belief in the simplest aspect of nature as God's revelation. American flower painters were mandated to respect God's floral kingdom and to suggest the spirit within the outer shell or envelope. This can be seen as part of a larger cultural aim—nothing less than the spiritualization of matter and, at times, of American materialism. Flowers were neither decorative adjuncts nor scattered evidence of a relaxed Deity at play. They were cultural metaphors within which larger issues intersected.

The exact morphology of the organic envelope became available early on through the growing botanical sciences. There is an arc from Mark Catesby's gathering of specimens in the eighteenth century through the apogee of the great Audubon and his assistants to the elegantly incised line engravings of Isaac Sprague for Asa Gray's botany texts in the mid-nineteenth century. Sprague's work tutored the Hudson River painters on plant anatomy even as their own eyes wrested empirical observations from the "real" thing. The empirical perception and the idea begin their long seesaw relationship in the history of American art. It is the balance of that dialectic, cross-referenced with another dialectic between spirit and matter, that generates the American tradition of flower painting.

The American sense of the specific picked up the characteristic bend of a leaf, the vector of a stem, the inclination of a petal. Into this empirical understanding, based on close observation, was conflated an ideal concern for a type that would reflect the perfection of God's creation—part of an overall aesthetic search for the essence that defines species. But over and above all this spiritual engineering, the artists were conscious of the organic principle underlying living things: the growing flower contains in small all the vulnerability of the organic world, which we ourselves share.

Where do we look for influences? The seventeenth-century Dutch, of course. But Dutch art, with its sheen and wetness, is an art in which the senses establish their own kingdoms. It can be seen as an art of appetite or at best of epicurean lusts. Dutch flowers cater to the eye as if it were a mouth; multiplicity of detail itself stuffs space. But the American works, even those directly influenced by the Dutch, merge real and ideal with a more abstract sense, one that distances the subject for contemplation even as it offers it for a consumption more spiritual than physical. There is a sense of indwelling spirit, more closely allied (in another of those mysterious Oriental affinities we happen upon in American art) to the Tao than to anything else. If we posit American flower painting as a great tradition, it is situated somewhere between West and East, between the Dutch simulacrum of appetite and the Oriental simulacrum of life—ch'i, breath, spirit. And it comes from a culture as consistent as those traditions, a culture it reflects and creates in that mysterious ambiguity with which art relates to culture.

One of the key issues in flower painting is the metaphorical overlap between paint and juice. Paint, in one European tradition, is an "exudate" of personality, and a substance which sucks into it some of the great issues of pre-modern art before it becomes one of the heroes, as it were, of modernism. In the French nineteenth-century mainstream tradition, we are often as conscious of paint and formal innovations as of the flower as subject. With Fantin-Latour, for instance, we are teased by a great flower painter with ambiguous references to paint as paint, and paint as petal and floral texture. The floral still life is also a miniature theater in which to ring formal changes—to exercise pre-modern concerns with design and color which prepare the way for the exalted status the still life assumes in the modernist era. Paint as an ambiguous metaphor of sap and juice, and formal arrangement as a forecast of the picture's modernist autonomy—these, it seems to me, are more European than American.

The Americans, including many of the moderns, were after something else. Their paint and their compositions show it. Without invoking Bergsonian vitalism, we might speak of a special organic energy that invigorates the American flower-painting tradition, so that it is hard to call its products *natures mortes*. These *natures vivantes* are of such intensity that they leap across one of the great barriers of the time without noticing it—from the idea of God's creation to Darwin's stringent concept of organic growth. Somewhere in this leap, organicism and spirit prevail, though God, a casualty, is left behind. American flowers embody, if you will, creationist and evolutionary ideas in one. Even before Darwin, American artists' intense pragmatic encounters forced this quality of growth, of life, of becoming, into their paintings, drawings, and prints.

This is a key paradox. Despite their pragmatic encounters with the specific, these American artists also implicitly held in their minds the Neoplatonic notion of an ideal type—a perfect flower toward which all other flowers in their infinite variety aspired. Species, in a larger sense, were also kept separate. The artists, more attracted philosophically to the naturalist Agassiz than to the botanist Gray, held as long as they could to the belief that species had been formed by a "thought of God." Floral perfection, God-conceived through a creational omnithought, had to be respected.

How profoundly the idea of nature changed in the later nineteenth century in the shadow of great scientific insights! The century began with the earth limited to a biblical history of about six thousand years, with all species calmly residing in their categories and, like ranks of angels, praising the Lord that had conceived them. By the end of the century, the age of the earth had extended into pre-human twilights, and mutability of species now served the idea of an autonomous and headstrong nature. Organicism, stripped of its metaphysics, was part of a world infinite in time and newly emergent through evolutionary process. For American artists, the idea of a life-force, initially symbolic and spiritual, could very easily be converted into a "botanical" spirit that satisfied Darwinian tenets and looked forward to a world based on the conditional and relative rather than on Newtonian cosmic "clockwork." This is the context in which the works here might be seen. With one somewhat ironic addendum: the portrayal of the organic in pre-modern art is replaced, in one theory of modernism, by the autonomous "organicism" of the work of art itself. The image of process becomes, as in much modernism, its own reciprocal metaphor. The organic model, assimilated by one aspect of modernist aesthetics, is transposed and relayed into the modernist era.

"The painter strives and competes with nature," wrote Leonardo, who was closely read by the American artists. Flowers are surely one of the most difficult arenas in which to stage that competition. Flowers are perhaps nature's most perfect artifacts, in form, color, texture, and aroma—a property the painter can only encourage the viewer to conceptualize through the painted image. They are also some of its most evanescent. It is this contrast, profound but easily sentimentalized, between the life-spark and its imminent dissolution, that bestows on flowers—and flower painting—a sense of gentle urgency. Process and its medium, time, are often denied access to the planar dimension where flowers endlessly bloom in the hothouse of art. There is a particular irony, again, in the exclusion of the artist, the organic artificer, from the botanical paradise he or she makes permanent. Indeed, the artist immortalizing the flower engages in a complicated metaphor of his or her own mortality. No wonder that flowers, a mere phase in a reproductive cycle that we find aesthetically pleasing, have generated a formidable archaeology of feelings.

Yet do we exaggerate the fragility of the flower? Growth will out, the seed will split, its preservation cycles exploit birds and insects to maintain its universal regeneration. The flower is the epitome of the life spark, vitalism's archaic proof. The flower equally demands to be left alone *in situ* and invites amputation, cunningly provoking in us that subtle guilt that persuades us that a cut flower is a butchered process. Yet the organic survives, despite our depredations. In our own time, we can extend our discourse from the floral still life to its model, and from its model to ecosystems and survival, and even to Thurber's last flower. Flowers, perhaps, have now become a symbol of something else.

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Anonymous

Girl in Green, c. 1835

Nature's Bounty

This exhibition brings together fifty works by forty-one artists that illustrate the diversity of American floral painting from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Flower painting began in Europe in the late sixteenth century as an outgrowth of still-life painting. In Colonial America, where portraiture was the principal genre of painting, it was customary to add flowers either as decoration or as metaphors for some attribute of the sitter. In one sense, therefore, flower painting in America can trace its origins to the symbolic devices in figural representation.

Girl in Green (c. 1835) and *Little Girl Holding a Rose* (c. 1845) are later examples of this tradition. The artists remain anonymous, as do the identities of the sitters. No names, however, are needed to understand the role flowers play in conveying the moral code of the works. Each depicts a passive young girl holding a bouquet of green leaves, small wildflowers, and rosebuds, with a larger open rose in the center. In antiquity, roses were an attribute of Venus, whose fragility and fragrance were likened to a rose. During the Middle Ages, the rose was associated with the Virgin Mary, who is called the "rose without thorns," a reference to her sinlessness. Victorian floral dictionaries give roses a lengthy, diverse, and somewhat capricious set of symbolic values, including love, beauty, pleasure, pride, grace, charm, simplicity, secrecy, unity, decreased jealousy, and the reward for virtue. The greens in the nosegay represent everlasting life (ever green); the fern connotes sincerity and worthiness; the smaller flowers, violets and lilacs, stand for youthful innocence and modesty.

In this narrative, flowers have replaced overtly religious symbols considered idolatrous by puritanical New Englanders, whose precepts imposed severe austerity in matters of religion and conduct. Perfection is found in God's own creation, nature; nowhere is this flawlessness more unmistakable than in the flower. It is, therefore, the unpretentious flower that can proclaim and reinforce values judged essential to Christian life. Following an English practice, it was common to commission portraits such as *Girl in Green* and *Little Girl Holding a Rose* to mark moments of transition such as birth, death, or confirmation. These two portraits no doubt belong to this genre of commemorative works.

Eventually, flower painting became an independent entity, appreciated for its own diversity and beauty. Nonetheless, until the 1840s the so-called flower piece remained at the low end of the artistic hierarchy—often relegated to the "ladies," since the rendering of flowers, like needlework and china decoration, was part of a woman's training in gentility. "Simple" flower painting seemed to lack intellectual or moral lessons for either the artist or the viewer.

This attitude belies the respect and admiration in which floral paintings were held by the Dutch—who had brought the genre to America. Dutch flower paintings were scientifically accurate and filled with extravagant goods. The magnificent bouquet was meant to delight, if not overwhelm. Yet canvases overflowing with elegant and exotic blossoms were also intended to remind viewers of the transience of life. At the same time, birds, butterflies, and small buds served as emblems of resurrection and rebirth.

This is the tradition American artists inherited. In the paintings produced after the mid-nineteenth century, when floral pieces began to be esteemed, the flowers either appear alone or in a complicated display of game, fish, wine, fruit, and vegetables. Floral dictionaries, which explained the special significance of each blossom, were particularly popular in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was common practice to give

them as gifts. It is impossible to know when or how artists used these books. It seems clear, nonetheless, that narrative and symbolism in these paintings became subservient to form, color, and a dazzling display of opulence.

Most of the works in the exhibition give pride of place to flowers and floral themes. The aesthetic conceptions vary from ornamental, formal arrangements to more casual, seemingly random gatherings of objects. The artists themselves constitute a diverse group: most are best known for their flower pieces, but for some the floral theme represents a rare excursion into new terrain.

Artistic inclination aside, every work heralds an interest in the celebration of nature. Collectively, the paintings epitomize what Barbara Novak here calls an exquisite "blended garden," richly laced with nuances of sentiment, poetry, symbol, science, religion, and medicine—a garden that captures the constant, everlasting beauty of the natural world.

Severin Roesen, a German immigrant, is considered the foremost practitioner of the luxuriant still life in America. An extremely prolific painter, he is known to have completed nearly four hundred canvases replete with flowers, fruits, insects, birds and their nests. Roesen's large, highly finished canvases are made even more dramatic through his use of bright, bold color. For Roesen, such richness testified to the benevolence of God in prosperous pre-Civil War America. Roesen's influence on other American floral painters is unmistakable, even though he spent most of his career in New York City and Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Paul Lacroix worked and lived in New York and New Jersey. His small paintings are similar in style and concept to Severin Roesen's more imposing still lifes. Though Lacroix's works present fruit and exotic vegetables uncommon to American art, they only occasionally depict flowers. Despite their intimate scale, his paintings are ambitious, richly detailed, and glazed to an exquisite surface.

Martin Johnson Heade, an explorer-botanist-artist, lived in New York but traveled extensively, notably to Brazil and Jamaica. Early in his career, he produced dramatic coastal views; his trips to South America resulted in his famous series of hummingbird and orchid paintings. Heade moved to St. Augustine, Florida, in 1883 and, for the last twenty years of his life, concentrated on the native magnolia and the Cherokee rose. In his botanical renderings, flowers take on the crispness of scientific illustration; but any suggestion of coldness is mitigated by the lushness of the surface and background.

William Sidney Mount was renowned for his genre paintings and portraits. One of America's most accomplished artists, he did few floral works until late in his career, when he completed a series of "nature studies"—carefully detailed examinations of fruits still clinging to the branch or of particular flowers. Like Heade, Mount arrests a perfect moment in nature, a moment without blemishes or fallen blossoms. Moreover, through the precision of their rendering, the solitary blooms achieve an unexpected sense of monumentality.

Evocative, sensual interpretations of flowers come to us from **John La Farge**, who devoted nearly thirty years to composing lush, shimmering floral arrangements full of light and color. The works are permeated with romantic nuance that goes beyond the formal conception of a flower. La Farge, like Heade, was interested in capturing the mystery of the flower's generation and growth—studying the "plant from its cradle to its grave," as he said. In perceiving the flower as if it were a human portrait subject, he was influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of emotional development as it related to the evolution of variety and reproduction—a copy of Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) was in his library.

A pupil of La Farge, **Maria Oakey Dewing** studied at Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design in New York and with Thomas Couture in Paris. Dewing imbued her floral work with such a sense of reality that viewers called it "scented." She was also a devoted gardener and cultivated her own flowers to use as models. "One may begin with the human figure at the logical and realistic," she wrote, "but in painting the flower one must even begin at the exquisite and distinguished. Let not the student think that flower painting is the business of the amateur."

Louis Comfort Tiffany, the famous designer of decorative arts, worked with John La Farge on some early experiments in glass, but the two artists never

Anna Eliza Hardy

Roses, c. 1900

formed a true partnership. On a few rare occasions, Tiffany ventured into flower painting. The results vary from a loose realism suggestive of the contemporaneous Ashcan School to more luminous landscapes, reminiscent of the earlier Hudson River painters. In the end, however, Tiffany's floral pieces relate most closely to his decorative objects, where images are frequently divided into isolated areas, convey a weighty physicality, and are rendered in deep, glowing color.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the opening of trade with Japan and a wave of enthusiasm for Japanese art and culture. *Japonisme* started in Europe in the 1860s and by the 1880s had spread to America, where it took many different forms, including an interest in Japanese flowers such as peonies and chrysanthemums.

Julian Alden Weir, also a follower of John La Farge, studied in Paris, where he was influenced by Manet and the Impressionists, no less than by Japanese art. In Weir's lyrical paintings, objects are repeatedly arranged in asymmetric compositions and set against a shadowed background. From this framework, the poetic flowers emerge, lighter in color, but with a fecund heaviness greater than that of the vase that contains them. Both Julian and his older half-brother, **John Ferguson Weir**, were celebrated for their paintings of roses, flowers they frequently depicted on tabletops, arranged with fans, or in a Chinese vase. So fresh and real are the blossoms that the air around these pictures seems laden with perfume.

Similar to the Weirs' paintings in vitality and luxurious finish are the works of **Thomas Hovenden** and **Eugene Lawrence Vail**. Flower images are rare in the work of Hovenden, a well-known figure painter. Like the Weirs, Hovenden uses an irregular composition and pyramid form against a dark background. His work is brushy and textured with the delicate softness of silk. Vail, a portrait and genre painter, frequently did floral pieces. His papery petals are also derived from Impressionism, the color values graduated from reds to blue-greens in closely modulated tones. Though widely collected by Americans and Europeans, including King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy, Vail's reputation languished after his death.

French-born **Paul de Longpré** moved to Southern California in 1909, where he became an important and popular floral painter; many of his works were widely reproduced. Often compared to John James Audubon, de Longpré was an artist-naturalist devoted to pristine detail. The plants and flowers in the magnificent garden of his Hollywood home served as models for his paintings. Working primarily in large-scale watercolor, he produced carefully sketched blooms covered with repeated washes of translucent color. The insects hovering around the blooms help capture the mood of de Longpré's work—the ephemerality of the flower and its cascading beauty on a sun-drenched wall.

Many extremely competent but lesser-known artists of this period resided in the New York and New England areas. **John Williamson**, born in Scotland, immigrated to the United States at the age of five. Primarily a landscape painter, he worked around Lake George and at Glenwood-on-the-Hudson. His engaging floral arrangements are casual, almost rustic, and successfully capture the concept of "openness to nature" advocated by the English critic John Ruskin and celebrated by many American artists. We know very little about **Harriet Elizabeth Cheney**, save that she came from Middletown, Connecticut, exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum and the National Academy of Design, and married James Woodbridge Cheney. Her work is distinguished by its simple, painterly compositions of open blossoms against a solid background.

Charles Ethan Porter, another student at the National Academy, and member of the American Water Color Society, taught painting and drawing in Hartford and was a prolific master of fruit and flower pictures. With a letter of introduction from his friend Mark Twain, Porter went to Paris to study in 1881. Like other black artists, Porter's work was unappreciated in his lifetime. He often had to sell or swap his art for food to eat or flowers to paint. Porter favored rich, intense colors rendered in uniform light with clearly defined edges.

Born in Bangor, Maine, **Anna Eliza Hardy** was the daughter of a well-known artist, Jeremiah Pearson Hardy; she studied in Paris with the great flower and still-life painter Abbott Henderson Thayer. Like Porter, Hardy focused on fruit and flower still lifes, and she is celebrated for her exceptional pictures of roses. In the freely brushed, luminous mode of La Farge, Hardy presents a few simple roses, rounded and luscious, infused with nostalgic pleasure.

Edward Chalmers Leavitt was the leading still-life painter in Providence. Leavitt and George W. Seavey, also celebrated for his paintings of roses, appear to have been well known in their day. Seavey was from Waterville, Maine. He exhibited in Paris, London, and Vienna. Both Seavey and Leavitt painted with a sensitive delicacy; their works are carefully detailed with a gleaming, pristine finish. Affinities to Seavey and Leavitt can be found in the work of Hannah Brown Skeele from Kennebunkport, Maine. We know little about her beyond an obituary which notes that she "met with great success as a portrait painter. . . . Her other work was in the painting of animals and flowers." Skeele meticulously situates each of her detailed flowers with an almost obsessive clarity.

In his early years, Benjamin Champney studied in Paris and traveled to Italy, Germany, and England. He spent his summers in the North Conway area of the White Mountains of New Hampshire and used that locale for his landscape paintings. Champney's work is textured and full of splendid contrasts of color. The presentation of wildflowers in an outdoor setting reflects his interest in John Ruskin's notions about freedom of spirit and truth to nature.

On the West Coast, English-born Samuel Marsden Brookes became a prominent still-life painter and teacher by the 1870s. After moving to San Francisco in 1862, he exhibited his works widely and influenced many younger painters. Like Severin Roesen, Brookes combines a variety of exotic flora in his paintings, often species that did not grow in the same season or even in the same part of the world. His bounteous groupings rest on polished tabletops or ledges and, as William Gerdts has noted, "reflect a secure world . . . [that] . . . fit in comfortably with the optimism of pre-Civil War America."

Thomas Hill, also born in England, was raised in Massachusetts and attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He went to California in 1861, where he later became part of Brookes' circle at the California Art Union. Hill was generally known for paintings of the Yosemite Valley. His early floral work, in which remarkable objects are arranged in an excessive display, confirms Brookes' influence. Hill's late compositions are simpler, with a softer palette and a brushy, textured surface.

Edwin Deakin, who shared a studio with Brookes, specialized in picturesque views, often including California missions and Indian artifacts. Like Dewing and de Longpré, Deakin was a passionate gardener and frequently used his Berkeley rose garden as the setting for paintings. Deakin was also a photographer, and it is not surprising that we find architectural elements defining the space of the picture. This space is punctuated, however, by a view into the background, which serves to thrust the still-life elements forward into our space.

By the late 1880s the work of a younger group of artists, many of them native Californians, was being exhibited on the West Coast. Elizabeth Keith, Angela Ghirardelli, and Alice Brown Chittenden were among California's most talented painters. Keith received some early training in Germany and participated in the San Francisco Art Association inaugural exhibition. Her elaborate and well-exhibited still-life paintings are minutely detailed and often include complicated arrangements of cultivated flowers, wildflowers, and fruits. Ghirardelli and Chittenden both attended the California School of Design; Ghirardelli abandoned painting after her marriage, but the work she produced to that point is rich in texture and contrast, with closely modulated color heightened in the foreground by touches of white. Her painting is closer to the relaxed brushwork found in the late paintings of Thomas Hill than to the formality of Samuel Mardsen Brookes. This is also true of Alice Chittenden, whose floral pieces show affinities to the French, probably through the influence of John La Farge and perhaps Julian Alden Weir. Chittenden, another artist noted for painting roses, traveled extensively, exhibited in New York and Europe, and supported her family by teaching at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, still-life painting was subject to the vicissitudes of both taste and the art market. Fewer artists were painting on commission, and interest diminished in the so-called dining room picture, of which still lifes were a favorite theme. Yet many twentieth-century artists found satisfaction in continuing to paint flowers and floral subjects.

Edwin Dickinson was a romantic painter whose style seems akin to the softly focused painting of Hardy or Chittenden. He combined strong tonal atmosphere with a solid underlying structure—probably the direct

Georgia O'Keeffe

White Calico Flower, 1931

result of his studies with Charles Webster Hawthorne and William Merritt Chase.

Maurice Brazil Prendergast retains the concept and structure of nineteenth-century still lifes, though his isolated forms, delineated by darkened outlines, reveal a more modern spirit. Prendergast's use of comfortable reddish browns, blues, and greens, creates a homey quiet scene, the dappled even light suggesting the sun-drenched gardens favored by the Impressionists.

Thomas Hart Benton, Arthur B. Carles, Andrew Dasburg, Preston Dickinson, Walt Kuhn, and **Alfred Maurer** all combined some component of modernist development with conventional still-life arrangements. Insistently exploring spatial ambiguity and distortion, the works of these artists are more closely involved with formal aesthetic concerns than with the depicted subject. **Hans Hofmann** was trained in Neo-Impressionism and knew many of the artists attached to the vanguard modernist movements of Fauvism, Orphism, and Cubism. His interpretations of nature are structured with vivid energy; primary color is merged with freely drawn shapes—flowers and greenery splashed across the thickly painted surface.

Charles Demuth, Georgia O'Keeffe, and **Joseph Stella** repeatedly turned to floral themes, depicting flowers with delicate precision. Unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts, whose exactness was both abstract and scientific, these artists offer supple, expressive flowers. In each case the blossoms are sensitive descriptions that go beyond botanical form. O'Keeffe and Stella magnified their flowers, imbuing them with iconic status, while Demuth rendered intimately detailed flowers softly washed with color. **Charles Sheeler** composed his paintings in the same way he arranged his photographs, that is, to fully explore the potential of spatial arrangement. He juxtaposed the organic with the man-made, fully exploring the possibilities of the rhythmic contrast between line and curve.

Charles Burchfield's personalized and evocative work was always inspired by nature. He was a master watercolorist, and many of his outdoor scenes were completed in this medium. Burchfield's stylized landscapes are a study in contrast: on the one hand, bright sunlight and dashes of color suggest bushes in full bloom; on the other, somber tones of black, brown, and gray surround and oppress the burgeoning garden, evoking nature's unpredictable order.

The floral piece has provided American artists with subject matter rich in meaning, whether universal or personal. Georgia O'Keeffe once summed up the artist's encounter with nature in this way: "I know I can not paint a flower. I can not paint the sun on the desert on a bright summer morning but maybe in terms of paint color I can convey to you my experience of the flower or the experience that makes the flower of significance to me at a particular time."

KATHLEEN MONAGHAN

Associate Curator, Permanent Collection
Whitney Museum of American Art

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width. Sight refers to measurements taken within the frame or mat opening.

Anonymous

Girl in Green, c. 1835
Oil on canvas, 54 x 36
Shelburne Museum of Art, Vermont; Dick S. Ramsay Fund

Anonymous

Little Girl Holding a Rose, c. 1845
Watercolor on paper, 22 3/4 x 17 5/8
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch 68.102

Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975)

Flowers, 1911–12
Watercolor and graphite on paper, 18 1/4 x 16 1/4
Private collection

Samuel Marsden Brookes (1816–1892)

Still Life—Fruit and Flowers, 1869
Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 20 1/8
The Oakland Museum, California; Gift of the Herbert Gray Hills Fund

Charles Burchfield (1893–1967)

Noontide in Late May, 1917
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 21 5/8 x 17 1/2 (sight)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 31.408

Arthur B. Carles (1882–1952)

Bouquet Abstraction, c. 1930
Oil on canvas, 31 3/4 x 36
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 53.41

Benjamin Champney (1817–1907)

Pansies, c. 1880
Oil on canvas, 12 1/2 x 17 1/2
Private collection

Harriet Elizabeth Cheney (1838–1913)

White Roses, c. 1890–1900
Oil on canvas, 10 x 16
Private collection

Alice Brown Chittenden (1859–1944)

Still Life with Roses in a Vase, 1909
Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 18 1/4
Private collection

La Franc Roses, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 24 1/2 x 40
Collection of James McNair

Andrew Dasburg (1887–1979)

Tulips, 1934
Crayon on paper, 24 x 17 7/8
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 40.15

Edwin Deakin (1838–1923)

"Tribute to Sainte Barbe" (A Tribute to Santa Barbara), 1907
Oil on canvas, 41 1/2 x 31 1/2
Collection of Phila Witherell Rogers

Charles Demuth (1883–1935)

Daisies, 1918
Watercolor on paper, 17 1/4 x 11 3/8 (sight)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.423

August Lilies, 1921
Watercolor on paper, 11 3/4 x 17 7/8 (sight)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 31.422

Maria Oakey Dewing (1845–1927)

Bed of Poppies, 1909
Oil on canvas, 25 x 30
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; Gift of an anonymous donor

Edwin Dickinson (1891–1978)

Roses (Still Life), 1939
Graphite on paper, 10 15/16 x 12 15/16
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. Robert M. Benjamin in honor of Flora Biddle 91.49.1

Preston Dickinson (1899–1930)

Interior with Flowers, c. 1924
Oil on canvas, 26 x 20
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alan H. Temple 59.45

Angela Ghirardelli (1859–1936)

Pansies in the San Francisco Chronicle, 1886
Oil on canvas, 17 x 21 1/2
Collection of Polly Ghirardelli Lawrence

Anna Eliza Hardy (1839–1934)

Roses, c. 1900
Oil on canvas, 11 1/2 x 16
Private collection

Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904)

Cherokee Roses, c. 1888
Oil on canvas, 20 x 12
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.

Thomas Hill (1829–1908)

Still Life—Fruit, Flowers, Wine, 1858
Oil on canvas, 25 x 30
Collection of Oscar and Trudy Lemer

Flowers in Window, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 36 x 20
The Oakland Museum, California; Kahn Collection

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)

Bouquet, c. 1932
Gouache on paper, 15 5/8 x 11 1/2
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Lillian Kiesler in memory of Alice Hodges 91.27

Thomas Hovenden (1840–1895)

Peonies, 1886
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 1/8
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Gift of Mrs. Edward H. Coates (The Edward H. Coates Memorial Collection)

Elizabeth Keith (1838–1882)

California Wild Flowers, c. 1872
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20
Saint Mary's College of California, Moraga; Gift of Anne Scott-Knight Smith

Walt Kuhn (1877–1949)

Flowers on Red Base, 1921
Oil on canvas, 14 1/4 x 9
Midtown Payson Gallery, New York

Talisman Roses, 1935
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Susan and David Workman 71.245

Paul Lacroix (active 1858–69)

Vase of Flowers and a Shell, 1867
Oil on board, 14 x 10
Private collection

John La Farge (1835–1910)

Flowers on a Window Ledge, 1862
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Edward Chalmers Leavitt (1842–1904)

Untitled, 1870
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16
Private collection

Paul de Longpré (1855–1911)

Flowers and Bees, 1899
Watercolor on paper, 26 x 14
Private collection

Alfred Maurer (1868–1932)

Flowers, c. 1912
Oil on cardboard, 21 1/4 x 18
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.300

Still Life, n.d.
Oil on board, 18 x 21 1/2
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Charles Simon 61.17

William Sidney Mount (1807–1868)

Tulips, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 9 x 7
The Museums at Stony Brook, New York

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986)

White Calico Flower, 1931
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 32.26

Charles Ethan Porter (1847–1923)

Pink Hollyhocks, 1884
Oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 12 1/8
Private collection

Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1858–1924)

Cinerarias and Fruit, 1915
Oil on canvas, 21 x 27
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 32.48

Severin Roesen (c. 1815–c. 1872)

Flower Piece, 1862
Oil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 30 1/2
Private collection

George W. Seavey (dates unknown)

Violets in an Ivory Bowl, 1892
Oil on canvas, 8 x 16
Private collection

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)

Chrysanthemums, 1912
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 55.24

Geranium, c. 1926
Oil on canvas, 32 x 26
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.343

Hannah Brown Skeele (1829–1901)

Morning Glories, c. 1870
Oil on canvas, 14 x 11
Portland Museum of Art, Maine; Gift of Dr. Carl and Linda Metzger

Joseph Stella (1887–1946)

Mixed Flowers with Hydrangea, 1919
Silverpoint and colored crayon on paper, 14 1/8 x 16 3/8
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Sergio Stella
86.59

Gardenia, 1921
Silverpoint on paper, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4
Private collection

Still Life, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 15 x 24 1/4
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. N.E. Waldman 58.52

Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933)

Flowers, 1908
Watercolor on paper, 14 x 10
Private collection

Eugene Lawrence Vail (1857–1934)

Poppies, 1895
Oil on canvas, 15 x 9
Private collection

John Ferguson Weir (1841–1926)

Roses, 1883
Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 24 1/2
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts

Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919)

Les Petites Roses, 1887
Oil on canvas, 35 5/8 x 23 1/2
The Huguenot Historical Society, New Paltz, New York

John Williamson (1826–1885)

Vase of Flowers, 1861
Oil on board, 9 x 7
Private collection

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Champion

One Champion Plaza
Stamford, Connecticut 06921

Gallery Hours

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Free admission

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